

KEY CONCEPT

Common knowledge

A specific concept of 'common knowledge' has been developed by Anne Edwards¹, and connects with other Vygotskian concepts used in this handbook (like the zone of proximal development, Page 34, and double stimulation, Page 46). In the context of people collaborating on complex problems (precisely what is involved in working in partnership with parents of children at risk), common knowledge isn't about everyday knowledge or even having the same knowledge in common. Common knowledge, in the sense used here, is made up of what matters to helpers and parents, the motives that shape and take impactful partnership practice forward². Put most simply, common knowledge is a respectful understanding of others' motives. Common knowledge is important because it can represent differences between people working together, and enable them to consider the consequences of these differences for how they should proceed³.

This is a mind-expanding process, as the helper learns more about parents, and parents learn new ways of connecting what matters to them with actions they take. When helpers stay true to what matters to them, specialist expertise can come into productive entanglement with what parents know and their everyday experiences of parenting.

What matters to parents

Parenting is infused with values and motives about what kind of family to be, what kind of relationships the child will have with her or his caregivers. 'What matters' refers to what parents feel is important, the things they are attached to, and the aspects of parenting and childhood they value. What matters shapes aspects that parents may be open to changing or where compromise may be made, as well as those that are protected and cherished strongly.

Discussing outcomes in terms of children's or parents' learning with parents (see Pages 58–65) can be a useful way to find out what matters to parents.

What matters to helpers

What matters to a helper could be developing the agency of parents in relation to the developmental trajectory of a child (see Pages 48 and 52 [where agency and agency of the child key concept boxes are]).

It may also matter to develop particular kinds of relationships (as described in Section 1), and of course always, to keep children safe and foster their healthy development.

Helpers are intimate outsiders in family life (see Pages 8–9). Part of the intimacy involves learning about parents' deeply held motives and values. Being an outsider means that what matters to helpers will often not be exactly the same as what matters to parents.



One shared focus, different 'what matters'

Impactful partnership does not require what matters to helpers and parents to be the same. Working with what matters is not about sameness, but about being explicit about what matters, recognising differences, and aligning responses accordingly. This is why the concept of common knowledge highlights differences (see concept box left).

This is also reflected in the diagram [see below] – there are two arrows showing that while the helper and parent are working on the same problem together, what matters to them in doing that work can be different. However, both arrows are converging on that shared problem – showing that these what matters are aligned. If the arrows are parallel, then the partnership will likely run into problems.

Why working with what matters requires skill and effort

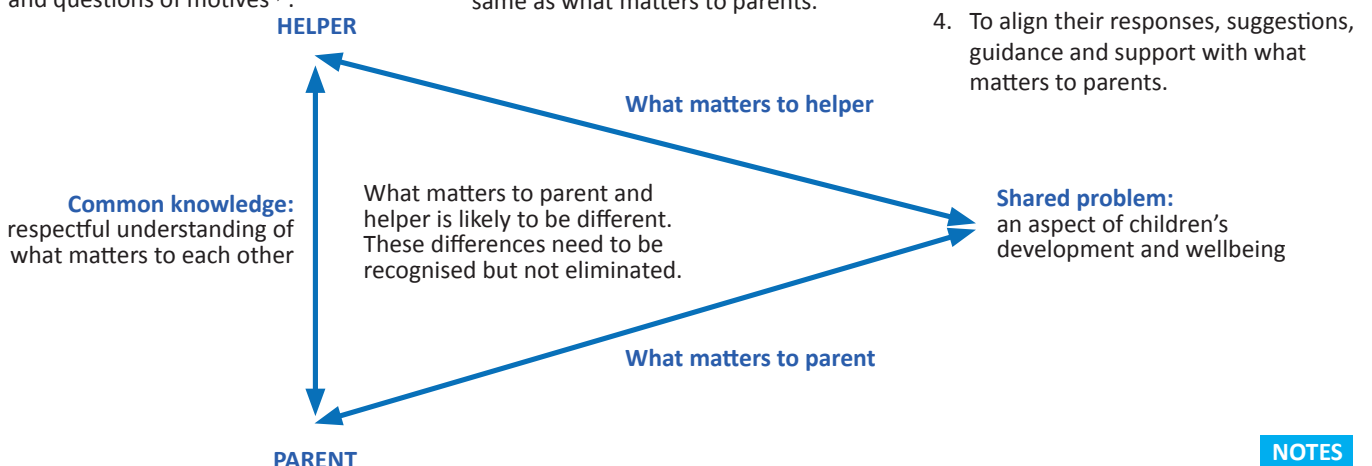
There are several challenges for the helper working effectively with what matters in impactful partnership.

1. To have a reflective awareness of what matters as a helper working with a particular family.
2. To make what matters to them explicit and available to parents
3. To solicit or detect what matters to parents
4. To align their responses, suggestions, guidance and support with what matters to parents.

Working with what matters: helper-parent

Summary

What made the difference between successful and less successful partnerships was whether the helper understood what mattered to parents, and aligned her suggestions and actions with that understanding. 'What matters' is a phrase researchers have used in relation to concept of 'common knowledge' (see concept box above) and questions of motives^{1,2}.



Each of these challenges requires both skill and effort on the part of the helper. The first will likely have some consistent features and some that vary depending on the family in question. The other three all require deliberate and focused attention in the course of work with parents. We found these are achieved in very different ways, reflecting helpers' styles, personality and their assessments of what will work well with *these* parents in *this* situation.

What matters and goals

The idea of what matters is related to but different from goals. A goal usually relates to a particular change that can be accomplished, or an end-state that is desired. 'What matters' refers to something deeper and more enduring.

For example, a mother may express a goal that her child will settle more easily at night and perhaps remain asleep for longer. What matters to her in this may include that her husband can be involved in bedtime routines, which may mean that the settling approach has to accommodate the father's work schedules. This 'what matters' reflects values relating to paternal involvement in child rearing, motives to share parenting and the child developing strong relationships with both parents. These have an important bearing on what it means to work towards the settling-related goals.

A key finding from the study was that determining goals and then suggesting ways to meet those goals is not sufficient to secure outcomes through partnership. A helper can offer all sorts of advice, guidance and support that are linked to a particular goal, but these may be rejected by a parent because they don't address, or even conflict with, what matters.

Sometimes it can seem like defining goals is enough, without the need to

get into deeper issues of what matters. However this is an illusion: impactful partnership works when it addresses what matters. When a more surface approach seems to work, this is likely because it addresses what matters, even if what matters was not made explicit.

Finding out what matters to parents is different from identifying and negotiating goals. Goals may need to be deliberated in order to be sufficiently focused or achievable. Exploring deeper motives may require finely honed skills in helping parents consider their values and priorities. While motives may be deeply held, they may not be talked about often, and may only be at the edges of parents' conscious thought. Helpers may come to understand what matters to parents indirectly, by listening carefully to how parents respond to particular ideas or suggestions, or detecting hints from the ways they talk about the challenges they are facing.

An example

The example in the diagram [below] relates to parents at a day stay. Their stated goals were to reduce their daughter's night waking and increase her solid food intake.

"If there's a way to help her eat better, and sleep better, we want to know."

(Parent, start of day stay)

What mattered for the parents in the example was child-led parenting and minimal crying. However, this was not discovered until later on in the process. What mattered to the nurse was developing the parents' capacity. They said they were 'suckers' who 'concede too much'. So, the nurse suggested

ways in which they could take more of a lead in settling. Having heard that the parents were force-feeding the child, what mattered to the nurse was also establishing relaxed feeding in which the child had some control.

"I don't see why this is necessary, we can get her to sleep on her own terms."

(Parent, later in day stay)

Good progress was made in relation to feeding. The nurses' suggestions that they let the child feed herself, focusing on making mealtimes relaxed and fun, aligned with the parents' values of child-led parenting.

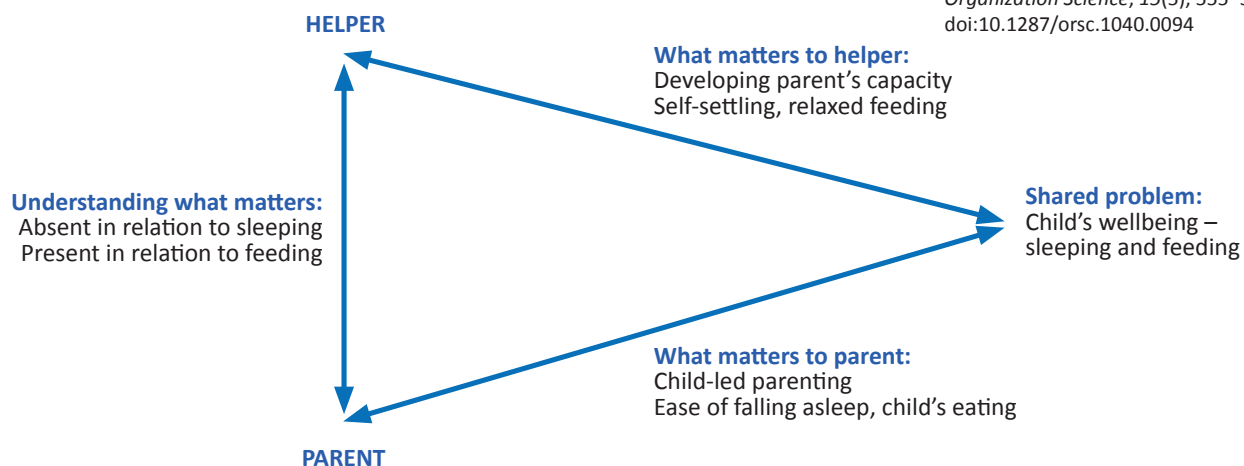
However, suggestions relating to settling were resisted by the parents. They felt they were making things harder for their daughter. The nurse acted in good faith, offering strategies that aligned with the parents' goals. But, because what mattered to them wasn't clear to the nurse, the intervention failed.

This shows how important it is for helpers to understand what matters to parents and align interventions with this (a detailed account of this example is available on request¹).

¹ Hopwood, N., & Edwards, A. (2017). How common knowledge is constructed and why it matters in collaboration between professionals and clients. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 83, 107–119. doi:10.1016/j.ijer.2017.02.007

² Edwards, A. (2017). Revealing relational work. In A. Edwards (Ed.), *Working relationally in and across practices: cultural-historical approaches to collaboration* (pp. 1–21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³ Carlile, P. R. (2004). Transferring, translating and transforming: an integrative framework for managing knowledge across boundaries. *Organization Science*, 15(5), 555–568. doi:10.1287/orsc.1040.0094



FRAMING IDEAS FOR Impactful Partnership

Diverse impacts
Small things with big effects
Mind-expanding
Intimate outsiders
Evolving art

Revision

Helpers and parents care about different things, even when they are working together on a shared problem. Recognising these differences and making them explicit can produce a valuable resource that enables impactful partnership to unfold in a way that is acceptable to parents and secures their commitment to taking on challenges and persisting with unfamiliar strategies. Helper expertise is needed to solicit what matters to parents, to make what matters to them as helpers explicit, and to align their responses accordingly.

For more information on the key concepts and findings relating to this worksheet see: [creating-better-futures.org/](https://www.creating-better-futures.org/)

To claim a certificate on completed worksheets see: <https://www.creating-better-futures.org/claim-your-certificate/>

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1. Key concepts – check your understanding

In your own words, explain what each aspect of what matters between helper and parent involves, and make connections to the framing ideas for impactful partnership where you can:

What matters to parent:

What matters to helper:

Common knowledge between helper and parent about what matters to each:

2. Linking ideas to practice

Now you have the concepts in mind, the next step is to connect them to your practice:

Concept	How it relates to my practice
What matters to parent	
What matters to helper	
Common knowledge between helper and parent about what matters to each	

3. Understanding the diagram

The diagram below represents the relationships between what matters to parents and helpers trying to work in impactful partnership. Common knowledge of what matters can be used as a resource for interventions that move beyond working towards shared goals alone.

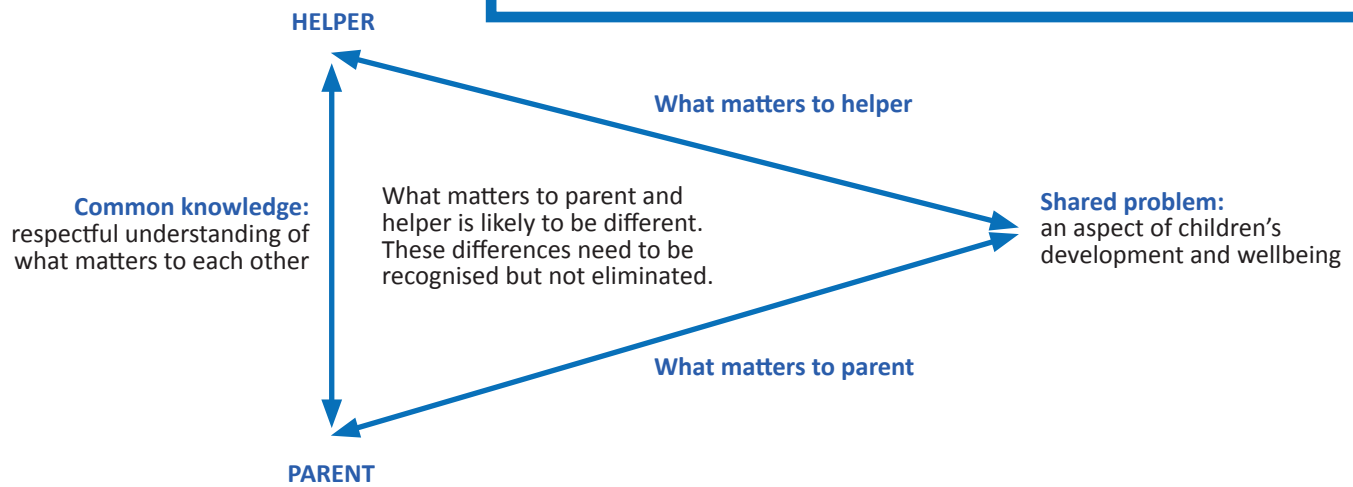
If this diagram doesn't make sense to you, draw something that captures the ways in which helpers' understanding of what matters to parents contributes to impactful partnership on a separate sheet.

Key concept: common knowledge (helper-parent)

Common knowledge, in the sense used here, is made up of what matters to helpers and parents, the motives that shape and take impactful partnership practice forward. Put most simply, common knowledge is a respectful understanding of others' motives.

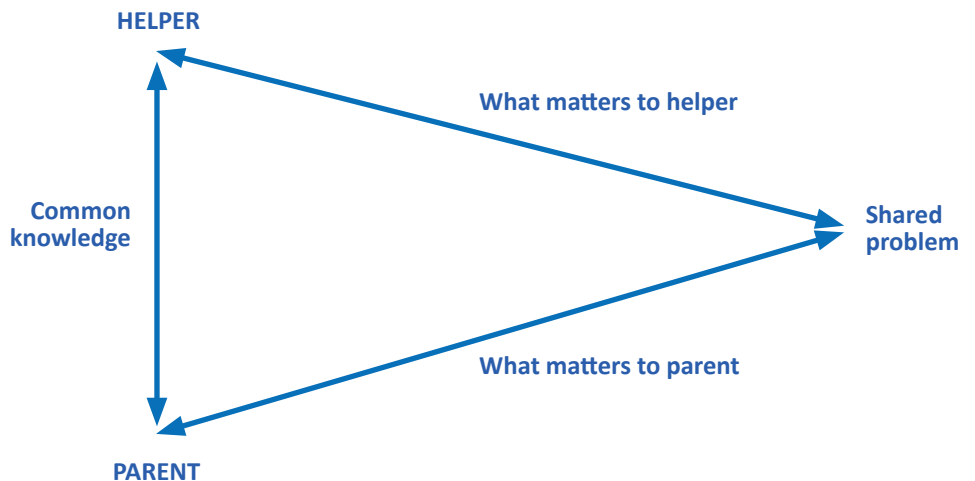
Common knowledge is important because it can represent differences between people working together, and enable them to consider the consequences of these differences for how they should proceed.

See (1) Edwards, A. (2017). Revealing relational work. In A. Edwards (Ed.), *Working relationally in and across practices: cultural-historical approaches to collaboration* (pp. 1–21). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
 (2) Carlile, P. R. (2004). Transferring, translating and transforming: an integrative framework for managing knowledge across boundaries. *Organization Science*, 15(5), 555–568. doi:10.1287/orsc.1040.0094



4. Working with the diagram

Think of a family you are working with currently or have worked with previously. Complete the blank diagram (see right) or use a separate sheet if you need more space, in relation to one key problem or issue that you worked on together – this is the 'shared problem'. Once you have written what mattered to you and to the parent in the relevant places, write what the 'common knowledge' made possible.



5. Enhancing your practice

On a separate sheet:

1. Choose two of the *Questions for reflective practice* (see right) and write your answer on a separate piece of paper. If they don't quite work you can adapt them.
2. Look at the *Questions to adapt and ask with parents* (see right). Think of a family you are working with or have recently finished working with. Choose two questions you think you could use or adapt to ask the parents, and explain why these might be important, and what you think they might say in response.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

- What do I know about what matters to parents in relation to the problem we are working on?
- What worked well in the past to ensure my suggestions were aligned with what mattered to parents?
- How can I be sure that the help I'm offering aligns with what matters to these parents?

QUESTIONS TO ADAPT AND ASK WITH PARENTS

- What is important to you about this issue / problem?
- What boundaries or criteria would you want to have in place in terms of strategies we might use?
- If we were to be successful in our work on this problem, what would success look like, in detail?

Creating Better Futures: Practice Handbook for Impactful Partnership

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Department of Education

